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REMARKS

1578 / 3152

ON

SANCTIFIED AFFLICTIONS:

In Answer to the Question,

HOW MAY A PERSON BE ASSURED THAT HIS
AFFLICTIONS ARE SANCTIFIED?

EDINBURGH:

Printed for J. OGLE, Parliament-square, and
M. OGLE, Wilton Street, Glasgow.

1797.

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Originally printed in the Gospel Magazine, for 1771.

*How may a person be assured that his afflictions
are sanctified?*

THE afflictions of the Lord's people are undoubtedly always productive of spiritual advantage to their souls; for the inspired Paul expressly says, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, and are the called according to his purpose." These salutary effects, however, are not always easily discerned. On the contrary, the good which they do the believing soul is commonly matter of much distress for a time, till the muddy waters being somewhat settled, the child of sorrow begins to see the dust of the Redeemer's feet in the cloud which lately overspread his tabernacle. For it ought to be remembered, that the Bridegroom pays most of his visits to his betrothed in his cloudy chariot; so that we are seldom sensible of his presence till he is gone, and the favour of his good ointments convinceth us that he was really present. But let the cloud be ever so gloomy and black, the aspect of Providence ever so threatening, it is impossible that the visits of Jesus should do no good, let him assume what mode of appearance he will. His external appearances may vary, but his heart is still the same melting heart of mercy and compassion.—But, as the Lord does visit his people with afflictions, and as afflictions duly sanctified are a great blessing, how may a person be assured that



his afflictions are sanctified? I might answer, When he finds more love to God, more submission to the divine will, more patience in tribulation, and more of a spirit of prayer and supplication than before, as is commonly answered in such a case. But I cannot persuade myself, that this is the happiest method of strengthening the weak hands, and confirming the feeble knees of God's poor afflicted children, seeing some of them may examine very closely, and yet be able to apprehend nothing but the very contrary of these feelings;—and does our divine religion provide no ground of encouragement for them? Yes, verily; and afflictions are certainly sanctified, when,

1st, They draw forth our latent corruptions to view; which is frequently done, when, in reality, we cannot find more love to God, more humble submission to his will, more of a spirit of prayer, and more heart-inclination to spiritual duties. Instead of love, the enmity of the carnal heart is discovered; instead of humble submission to his will, we experience an impatient, rebellious spirit, which we could hardly have believed ourselves the subjects of, without this disagreeable experience. There these corruptions dwelt before, but lay concealed in the deep recesses of the soul, till the harrow of affliction brought them to view. *Whatsoever doth make manifest, is light*; and all light cometh from God the Father of lights. Hence some are afflicted, and see no more of their hearts than before, because the light of God's Spirit never shone at all into their hearts to bring them to view. But, in this case, the believer is apt to mistake the real effects of afflictions for evils instead of blessings. When unbelief, impatience, and carnal enmity, pride, and self, are manifested, he concludes, that his heart is now worse instead of better. By his afflictions, he may be terrified at the discovery he has of himself, and deem his awful feelings certain badges of alienation from God; whereas the truth is, the old nature is just what it was before, enmity against God: but grace has brought it more to light; and therefore the advantage is greatly on the side of the Christian, as an hidden enemy is by far more dangerous than an open one. Perhaps, in the days of Job's first prosperity, it would have been difficult to persuade him, that he was capable of



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charging God as dealing cruelly with him ; but his afflictions irritated the remaining enmity of his heart, and drew it forth in its native opposition to God. Had not this enmity been native in his heart, it had not, on this occasion, been drawn forth : the pious man might have continued its subject ignorantly ; therefore its discovery was certainly to his advantage.

2dly, Afflictions are sanctified, and for good, when they put our faith to the trial, that we may feel how weak it is, and how subject we are to doubt the mercy and goodness of our gracious God to us in the day of our calamity. It is not enough that we attain the knowledge of Christ, as the keeper of our persons ; but God will make him known, as the keeper of our faith also : which knowledge is attainable only by faith being put to the trial, that, by feeling its own infirmity and weakness, it may live upon its proper object, and not upon itself. Hence, in the beginning of any severe affliction, the soul is sometimes left to itself, in its own strength, to struggle at once against the streams of affliction, unbelief, and rising corruption, that the Lord may shew unto us all that is in our hearts. It was to little purpose that Jesus told the zealous, well-affected Peter, *That he had prayed for him, that his faith should not fail*, whilst he thought himself capable of cleaving to him, even unto death. But when he found that he was capable of denying him, his sole consolation lay in the prayer of his Redeemer, *That his faith should not fail*. An untried professor is a very dubious character : therefore God has very wisely joined religion with the cross, and afflictions with faith ; for faith cannot live in its exercise without its fights and conflicts. Now, where would be the trial, if faith did always triumph over its opponents ? It would blunt the edge of the enemy's sword, and extract the bitterness from affliction ; so that, in very deed, the affliction sustained would not answer the end proposed, namely, to bring forth our unbelief to open light. The foundation of all faith and strength, victories and triumphs, lies in felt weakness. Jacob threshes no mountains to powder, till he feels himself a worm ; and the moment he feels himself reduced to that state of nothingness, he commeth a new threshing instrument, having teeth. Sampson can never overthrow the house of Dagon, till he himself,

in his own person, is entirely in the hands of the Philistines; but once totally deprived of personal excellency, he lays hold on the power of Omnipotence, and works the destruction of his enemies. Afflictions are the scissors which shear away personal strength, excellency, and supposed ability for doing good, or withstanding the power of our spiritual enemies, in our own persons. Whilst we can go out and shake ourselves, and break the withes with which our sins have attempted to bind us, we shall smile at Delilah's web, and ascribe the victory to our own graces, instead of that grace which is in Christ. But when our personal strength is gone, and we feel ourselves, in reality, within the power of the enemy, without the light of comfort, and incapable of delivering ourselves, we then look to the Lord alone, from whom cometh our help; so that our very weakness is the foundation of all gospel strength and victory. But weakness can never be felt unless we are called to sustain hardships; and the strength of our faith, hope, and charity is tried to the utmost.

3dly, Whenever afflictions lead their subjects into a further knowledge of their own wretchedness, and total inability for either doing or bearing the will of God, unless fresh communications from him, in whom it hath pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell, are afforded, I must conclude that they are sanctified, and of real advantage. The leading design of the blessed gospel, is to bring us to live on the grace that is in Christ, not on that which is in ourselves. We shall never live upon the grace that is in Christ, till we are driven out of ourselves. Nothing will drive us out of ourselves but soul-famine, a thorough sense of the plague and pollution of our nature, and of total helplessness in ourselves: and wherever these discoveries are made, and by whatever means, it is clear that these means have been owned and sanctified. When the soul with respect to comfort may be said to walk in darkness, and have no light, Ephraim shall grow as the lily, the strength and fertility of which lie in the root. In winter, the lily loses all its beauty and fragrance, but nothing of its fertility and excellence, those are safe in the root. The believer grows downward into his root,

Christ in the winter state of affliction, when his buds and blossoms seem to be beaten off by the bleak winds and falling rains. Buried thus in the root in winter, he shall yet spring up in summer, and the good favour of the Redeemer's ointments shall breathe ambrosial fragrance all around him. When he hath learned to glorify Christ, by living entirely upon him, Christ will glorify him with the beautiful and ornamental fruits of believing.

ably, As I would fain reach the case of the most distressed of God's afflicted children, being their brother and fellow in tribulation, I would observe, that it hath been said afflictions are sanctified, when they bring you nearer to a throne of grace. It is certainly true: But will it follow, that those afflictions, in which the soul is quite overwhelmed, the enemy comes in as a flood, and bears down all before him, the reasoning powers of the mind not excepted, and in which the tongue cleaves to the roof of the mouth for thirst, are not to be reckoned sanctified afflictions?

Some know, if my Reader does not, that afflictions may be so complicated, and so intense, as to incapacitate the soul, for a season, both for prayer and praise; yet the Christian shall emerge out of them with renewed strength and lustre, like the morning-sun: And shall those afflictions be deemed judgments, or un sanctified afflictions? I know no medium betwixt judgments and un sanctified afflictions; and am inclined, therefore, to number this most distressing of all cases among sanctified afflictions, which are to the believer's advantage. "When the poor and needy seek water, and find none, and their tongues cleave to the roof of their mouths for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Jacob will not forsake them." This evidently proves, that such afflictions are not to be understood as judgments; for in case of judgments, God would not hear, and would certainly forsake, contrary to that gracious declaration, "I the Lord will hear them, even when they cannot cry to me." When the tongue of prayer cleaves to the roof of their mouths, the Lord will hear their wants and distresses. Those afflictions must needs be salutary which stir up our Beloved to come to our assistance.—Moreover, there appears the same necessity of our being taught our inability.

ty for prayer as for believing, the power and spirit of both being equally from God, and solely dependent on divine influences. But how shall a man know this experimentally, unless he is left in the greatest necessity, sometimes incapable of the exercise of prayer? For a man who never felt in himself an absolute incapacity for prayer, to confess, "That we know not how to pray as we ought; that we are not sufficient of ourselves to think any thing of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God;" approaches too near to hypocrisy for God to allow it in his own children. Although bastards and Heathens may be suffered to go on with their vain, unmeaning repetitions, it will be not so with the children; for the great Prophet will teach them their total incapacity for prayer, and every thing that is good.

Whatever, therefore, brings us to a sense of our own ignorance, folly, weakness, sin, and wretchedness; whatever tends to break every reed upon which we are apt to lean, to pull down every lying refuge in which we are prone to trust; whatever tends to raze every sandy foundation of creature dependence; in a word whatever ungrasps our hold of creature-delight, empties us of all personal sufficiency, and lays the soul low, helpless, and hopeless, at the feet of the Redeemer, trusting alone in his free mercy; may, with the strictest propriety, be considered as sanctified, and to our advantage.

Ephraim had his dark and cloudy days of bemoaning himself amidst his reproach and shame, when God became a moth in his substance, and a lion in his family, rending and tearing away his dearest delights, shattering his idols, and casting down all his altars to sin. But were not these instances of the divine conduct towards him most evidently the fruits of God's unalterable attachment to him, and the greatest blessings that could have possibly befallen backsliding Ephraim?---blessings, which operated in his favour, even when he was, as yet, far from having the comfort of them:---blessings, all tending to bring him to that union of heart and affection to God described in the fourteenth chapter of Hosea.

Believers are apt to mistake in nothing more than in the effects produced by their afflictions: and if I am not greatly mistaken, many divines have taken the wrong method in describing them. The ultimate issue of them

most undoubtedly is, the peaceable fruits of righteousness. But their first and immediate effect is, to harrow up the soul, and bring the weeds, which grow there secretly, to open view. The wise husband-man thus harrows up the weeds in spring, which would otherwise spoil his expected crop; and when he has so done, he burns them with fire. At first view, one would suppose, that the beauty of the field is entirely ruined by this operation; yet, in the end, it effectually secures both its beauty and fertility.

There is a gracious promise delivered by Moses to Israel, which ought to be much regarded; "And the Lord thy God will put out before thee all these thine enemies by little and little:" a promise which sets before us the whole work of God in our sanctification; the agency by which, and the manner how the work is carried on.

Much beauty lies in this promise, and particularly in that clause, "Thine enemies shall be put out before thee." Thou shalt see thine enemies before they are put out: and, as sure as they are brought to thy view as enemies, the Lord thy God will put them out, though it may be by little and little.

God will bring all our inward enemies, every lurking Canaanite to light, before he puts them out, whatever pain the awful discovery may give us; for he studies our salvation and final possession of the promised land, rather than our present inclination and pleasure.---We would gladly enter into the land without so much as seeing war; but this is contrary to the purpose of God. It is the divine purpose, that the Canaanitish lusts of the human heart must be led to execution first; in order to which, they must be drawn forth from their dark and deep recesses, and brought before us, that we may bear witness against them of the evils which we have suffered on their account, and by their means. If a man is robbed on the high-way, in order to bring the villain who robbed him to public justice, he must confront him before the judge, and swear to the reality of the robbery, and identity of the person of the robber.

But when our gracious Redeemer, by means of affliction, or otherwise, brings forth the abominations of the heart to our view, how shocking is the discovery!

low dreadful our apprehensions !---as if we were in danger of being left to their power and dominion ; not recollecting, that they are so many prisoners in the hands of the officers of justice, and restrained from doing us any real harm.---A certain lady being robbed and barbarously treated on the highway, the ruffian who perpetrated the villany, being taken, was brought to trial and the lady obliged to appear against him at court. No sooner had she set her eyes upon him when brought to the bar, then she screamed out, as under the most alarming apprehensions of danger ; and with difficulty could be brought to believe that the villain was in fetters, and wholly in the power of the officers of the king.---It is frequently so with the poor believer, upon any particular discovery of what is in his heart. For want of considering, that sin hated is sin pardoned ; that abominations loathed are abominations cleansed ; he is apprehensive of the most awful and tremendous consequences of the discovery of his heart.

These things duly attended to, I am inclined to think it will appear, that the Lord's people are frequently afraid where there is no real ground for fear, and that we receive good very often under the disguise of evil. I shall add nothing more, but earnestly pray, that our sympathizing Redeemer may bless these few remarks for the benefit of the afflicted reader.

*The following Passage, from ORTON's Life of Dr DODD-
BRIDGE (p. 208), exhibits an amiable Example of
Christian Submission, combined with the tenderest Pa-
ternal affection.*

— THERE WAS no affliction, however, which lay with greater weight upon his mind than the death of his eldest daughter, who lived long enough to give him very agreeable hopes as to her pious disposition. In the sermon he published on that occasion, the world hath seen how his heart was affected, and what considerations supported him under that affliction ; and many mourning

parents have been comforted and instructed by the arguments and consolations he hath suggested in it. I wish such may reap a like advantage from viewing some of the workings of his heart in secret, which he recorded at once for his humiliation and thankfulness: and then my design will be answered; though others, who are strangers to the tender feelings of nature on such an occasion, may be unimpressed with his reflections.—In his Diary he writes, ‘I have been preaching from these words, “Is it well with the child?” And she answered, “it is well.” But surely there never was any dispensation of providence in which I found it so difficult to say it. Indeed some hard thoughts of God were ready to arise; and the apprehension of his displeasure against me brought my mind into a painful situation. But it pleased God to quiet it, and lead me to a silent, cordial submission to his will. I see that I doted too much upon her. My heart was open to her with a fond, flattering delight.—And now, O my soul! one of thy earthly delights is gone—Seek thy greatest delight in heaven, where I trust my child is; where I am sure my Saviour is; and where, I trust, through grace, notwithstanding some irregularities of heart on this occasion, I shall shortly be.—This circumstance I must record, that I recollected this day, at the Lord’s table, that I had some time ago taken the cup at that ordinance with these words: “Lord I take this cup as a public solemn token, that, having received so inestimable a blessing as this, I will refuse no other cup which thou shalt put into my hands.” I mentioned this again to day, and publicly charged the thought on myself, and Christian friends who were present. God hath taken me at my word; but I do not retract it. I repeat it again with regard to every future cup. Much sweetness is mingled with this bitter potion, chiefly in the views and hopes of the eternal world. May not this be the beauty of this providence, that, instead of her living many years upon earth, God may have taken her away, that I may be better fitted for and reconciled to my own dissolution, perhaps nearly approaching? Lord, thy will be done! May my life be used for thy service while it is continued; and then put thou a period to it

‘ whenever thou pleasest !’ — The next evening, after the funeral, he adds, ‘ I have now been laying the de-
‘ light of my eyes in the dust, and it is for ever hid
‘ from them. We had a suitable sermon from these
‘ words : “ Dost thou well to be angry for the gourd ? ”
‘ God knows that I am not angry ; but sorrowful he
‘ surely allows me to be. Blessed Lord, I trust thou
‘ hast received my child, and pardoned the infirmities of
‘ her short, childish, afflicted life. I love those who
‘ were kind to her, and those that weep with me for her :
‘ Shall I not much more love thee, who art at this mo-
‘ ment taking care of her, and opening her infant facul-
‘ ties for the business and blessedness of heaven ? Lord
‘ I would consider myself as a dying creature. My first
‘ born is laid in the dust. I shall shortly follow her, and
‘ we shall lie down together. But O how much pleasure
‘ doth it give me to hope, that my soul will rest with
‘ her, and rejoice in her, for ever ! But let me not
‘ centre my thoughts here. It is a rest with, and in God,
‘ that is my ultimate hope. Lord, may thy grace se-
‘ cure it to me ! and, in the mean time, give me a holy
‘ acquiescence of soul in THEE : and now my gourd is
‘ withered, shelter me under the shadow of thy wings.’

THE CONVERTED SINNER :

FROM OLNEY HYMNS, Page 273.

- 1 I ASK'D the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love, and every grace ;
Might more of his salvation know,
And seek more earnestly his face.
- 2 'Twas he who taught me thus to pray,
And he, I trust, has answer'd prayer ;
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

- 3 I hop'd that in some favour'd hour
At once he'd answer my request,
And by his love's constraining pow'r
Subdue my sins and give me rest.
- 4 Instead of this, he made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part :
- 5 Yea more, with his own hand he seem'd
Intent to aggravate my woe,
Cross'd all the fair designs I schem'd,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.
- 6 Lord, why is this ? I trembling cry'd,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death ?
'Tis in this way, the Lord reply'd,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.
- 7 These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free,
And break thy schemes of worldly joy,
That thou mayst seek thy all in me.

THE END.



